

The School-to-Work Program: A Proactive Approach

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An Introduction

The entry-level dilemma that plagues many recent college graduates regardless of field of study: “They need experience to get experience” dilemma. In today’s shrinking job market, many companies are less willing to take chances on recent graduates with little to no experience. Our tight and competitive job market also makes it harder for recent graduates to land their first job because many experienced professionals are forced to compete for the same “entry-level” positions. The “experience is the key to success” trend in our current job market does not seem to be fading in the future.

How can recent college graduates escape this paradox? One option students can explore to avoid this dilemma is participating in an internship program. According to the Career Center at Lewis and Clark College, “upon graduation, students with pre-professional intern experience secure jobs at roughly twice the rate of those without internship experience.” College students can find an internship helpful, even if they have already graduated, to “get their feet wet” in the business world. An internship can provide hands-on experience in the real working world and an opportunity to apply classroom concepts to actual work assignments.

The City of Houston’s Department of Public Works and Engineering (PWE) has addressed this entry-level dilemma by becoming part of the solution through the creation and execution of their own School-to-Work Program. The City of Houston is composed of twenty departments that all contribute toward the function of the fourth largest city in the United States. The Public Works and Engineering department is one of the largest departments in the city. The department is responsible for many aspects of daily life; most we take for granted like our water supply. The primary purpose of PWE according

to the City of Houston website is "the administration, planning, maintenance, construction management and technical engineering of the City's infrastructure." PWE consists of six vital divisions including Engineering and Construction, Planning and Development, Public Utilities, Resource Management, Right of Way Maintenance, and Traffic and Transportation.

The PWE department is taking a proactive approach to today's recent grad quandary through the implementation of the School-to-Work Program. An exploration into the City's internship program will reveal the many benefits and challenges of internships, as well as areas where key aspects could enhance the overall effectiveness of the program.

The City of Houston's PWE School-to-Work Program

In 1992, the City of Houston's Public Works and Engineering department (PWE) created its own internship program called the School-to-Work Program (STW), which is offered to qualified college students. The internship program is a full-time paid position that enables college students to gain practical professional work experience in their field of study. The STW Program allows students to take on responsibilities and challenges associated with full-time permanent professional positions. The program employs talented students from numerous diverse Texas universities. Lamar University, Texas A&M Kingsville, Texas A&M University, Prairie View A&M University, Rice University, University of Houston and University of Texas are some of the participating institutions. The program contains internship opportunities and a chance to assist in projects within each of the six PWE divisions. PWE allows a wide variety of majors to

be considered for internship positions because it's such a large and diverse department.

The program offers internship opportunities to students majoring in Accounting, Computer Science, MIS, Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Finance, Business, Public Administration and related Liberal Arts majors. Interns are able to work along side knowledgeable PWE staff to assist in projects directly impacting the city of Houston.

Below are some examples of projects interns might experience based on major:

<p>Engineering - Examines all aspects of maintaining the infrastructure of one of the largest water/wastewater networks in the country. Projects include: Forecasting Bidding costs using Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Access, Cross Connection Control and Backflow Prevention, Basic Municipal Wastewater Treatment</p>
<p>Computer Science / MIS - Involved in daily support, installation and maintenance of network systems. Projects include: Wireless LAN Security, Wireless Network Implementation, Creating Microsoft Access Forms</p>
<p>Accounting / Finance - Work on one of the largest departmental operation budgets in the city of Houston. Projects include: The Auditing Environment and the City of Houston's Water Utility Customer Service Center, Internal Controls, Capital Projects</p>
<p>Business - Assist on projects that relate to how city departments interact with Houston area schools and educational institutions. Projects include: Hispanic Engineers: A Plan of Action, Superior Performance Program Critique, Relief of Duty with Pay</p>

(Courtesy of <http://www.publicworks.cityofhouston.gov/resource/schoolwork.htm>)

The School-to-Work Program has five main objectives as stated on the School-to-Work informational packet given to interested candidates. The first objective is to create a unique learning process by incorporating classroom theory with well-supervised work experience. The second objective of the STW program is to create an environment in which the student takes on duties and responsibilities that are associated with everyday professional studies. The third program objective is to provide a competitive advantage

in the labor market for college and high school students with a focus on high risk or economically disadvantaged students. Fourth, the program was created to provide students with actual work experience related to their field of study. The final program objective as stated in the informational packet is to recruit students for full-time employment with the City of Houston.

There are numerous ways students can learn about the program. One way students learn and apply to participate is at university career fairs. Throughout the year the City of Houston's PWE department visits area-wide universities to recruit students for internships and full-time employment. Public Works and Engineering representatives from various divisions talk with students, answer questions, and encourage them to consider a career with the City. At these career fairs students can also fill out a brief one-page questionnaire and attach a current resume to be considered for the School-to-Work Program. The resumes collected at career fairs are the foundation for finding qualified interns for a given semester. Another method used by students to learn and apply for the STW Program is via the City of Houston website. The School-to-Work Program has a web page at: <http://www.publicworks.cityofhouston.gov/resource/schoolwork.htm> Here, students can learn about the STW Program as well as get facts and figures about the Department of Public Works and Engineering. After surfing the web page interested students may send a resume to the School-to-Work Program Coordinator to be considered. Interested students also learn about PWE's internship program through word of mouth. Many students learn about the program's existence from past STW participants. Many past participants recommend the program to friends, co-workers and classmates. The PWE department also maintains relationships with many Texas

university career centers. The City often posts STW internship positions on university online job banks. This option is very visible and effective with most students because they can register for career center services free of charge and access services regularly.

In order to participate, qualified students must meet certain program requirements. Students must have at least 32 credit hours (at least sophomore classification) and maintain a minimum 2.5 GPA to be eligible. Interns must also turn in necessary paperwork to be processed such as, City of Houston application, official transcripts and current resume. In addition to the daily activities, there are several events and requirements related directly to the program interns must adhere to. First, interns are required to take and pass a drug test as well as undergo finger printing upon selection in accordance to City of Houston policies and procedures. Students must attend a mandatory intern orientation held at the beginning of every semester to fully explain details of the program. Every Thursday morning students are required to attend weekly Toastmaster meetings to aid in the development of public speaking skills. Throughout the semester participants are required to attend tours of several Public Works and Engineering facilities to gain a better understanding of the department's many functions. Students must also submit a seven to ten page research paper on a topic relevant to their intern experience. At the end of the semester each intern is required to create a ten-minute PowerPoint presentation illustrating his or her research topic for the intern symposium. The symposium is an opportunity to showcase public speaking skills acquired through Toastmasters while also sharing aspects of their intern experience with supervisors, co-workers and fellow interns.

Almost 15 years ago, the City of Houston and the Department of Public Works and Engineering decided to address the entry-level dilemma and become part of the solution by constructing and implementing an extensive internship program that has and will continue to enriched the lives of area college students.

Benefits

Research has supported the many benefits of participating in an internship program, including PWE's School-to-Work Program. Students and employers alike reap the benefits of creating, implementing or participating in internship programs.

Students who participate in an internship program like the School-to-Work Program can better identify or confirm their career path. Internships also provide "hands-on" real-world experience in a field of interest, but with a short-term commitment. This short-term commitment benefits supervisors as well as interns. After "test-driving" a certain field through internship experience, some students discover they don't want to continue pursuing the same field. An internship also enables students to work along side and learn directly from experienced professionals. Mentors provide students with work assignments where students are empowered to contribute and apply classroom knowledge. Internships in general provide an opportunity to practice and acquire team building, communication and networking skills. The STW program allows students to improve their public speaking, team building and communication skills in a friendly, welcoming environment at weekly Toastmaster meetings. Students can also develop professional contacts, obtain potential work-related references and gain valuable recommendations during the course of their internship. Another appealing benefit is the

possibility of full-time employment or job offer from the internship organization.

According to the article "Students Describe the Benefits of Internships" by Peter Vogt, "Research shows that 85 percent of companies use internships and similar experimental education programs to recruit for their full-time workforces." Internships also provide students with valuable resume enhancing experience as well as enhancements to graduate school applications. Some internships also provide college credit per semester or financial compensation. Although most internships are unpaid, PWE provides an excellent salary to interns participating in the STW program based on credit hours completed. This benefit is especially attractive to students because it provides experience and financial support. Research also proves internships create a springboard from college life to the professional world. It allows students to experience life after college and help with the transitional stage.

Internships don't just benefit participants, but they also benefit internship providers. Internship organizations gain enthusiastic and motivated students eager to work each semester with fresh perspectives. The School-to-Work Program is no exception; it provides PWE the opportunity to recruit valuable and intelligent students. Providing an internship can also improve university/organization relationships by increasing name recognition of the organization on campus and improving campus recruitment. Interns also provide extra manpower and assistance with special projects and the most up-to-date knowledge and skills for on-going projects. Interns can also help on existing projects by bringing new perspectives to old problems. Implementing an internship program also provides employers with a pool of potential full-time employees without a long-term investment. A number of past School-to-Work interns have been

hired on as full-time permanent employees after proving their abilities during their internship. It is clear that the numerous benefits of an internship program provide a win-win situation for both participants and employers.

Challenges

Although the many benefits of an internship program outweigh its disadvantages, there are some challenges to overcome. One of the main challenges facing interns and internship programs is the reputation and stigma associated with "interns" and being a "go-fer". Many people see internships as filled with menial tasks without supplying any beneficial hands-on experience. Making copies, fetching mail and shredding documents are often part of the job and should be accepted as a way for interns to prove themselves. After doing menial tasks well and establishing trust, many students can gain more responsibility. Menial tasks are often unstated and understood aspects of internships along with real work-related experience. One way to reduce the reputation of being a "go-fer" is for employers to be honest and upfront about what the intern should expect throughout the internship. If the job requires some grunt work, let them know ahead of time to minimize any misconceptions regarding type of work. Internships are also often thought of as unfair because some believe positions are only given to company children. Although some programs may get the majority of their students from employees, the School-to-Work Program doesn't give preferential treatment to employee relatives. PWE gets most interns from career fairs and through university word of mouth. Another challenge facing internship programs is creating a steady flow of students throughout the year, each semester, each year. The School-to-Work Program is offered three semesters:

Fall, Spring and Summer. Most Summer terms are easily filled to capacity because more students are available for full-time internships during summer break when course loads are not heavy. It is also an opportune time period for students to gain real-work experience as opposed to taking a summer job. Fall and Spring semester positions are harder to fill because most students are taking courses full-time and don't have the availability to also do a full-time internship. Although the School-to-Work Program is a paid internship, many students don't want to delay their graduation in exchange for internship experience. Filling Fall and Spring semesters also hinder those interested who do not attend universities in Houston or surrounding areas. Many students originally from the Houston area come home during the summer and are available to work in Houston, or they have enough time to find living accommodations for the summer. Students who attend universities in other cities and have living circumstances elsewhere cannot realistically accept Fall or Spring internships. Another problem facing interns is having too much or too little work. If interns encounter too little work they can volunteer to help co-workers with anything they may need, familiarize themselves with company material, or observe supervisors and co-workers as they perform daily activities and make business related decisions. If students are faced with too much work they may communicate with their boss and help to establish priorities. Conflicts may also arise between supervisors/co-workers and interns regarding work expectations and issues. If this occurs, both parties must communicate with each other and attempt to resolve issues before taking any action. Although internship programs are overall very effective and advantageous, there are some challenges internship programs and the parties involved must confront and attempt to overcome.

Recommendations

Most programs are already effective due to the inherent nature of internships, but research suggests that there are certain key aspects of an internship program that ensure both quality and success for interns and employers alike. First, employers should decide standards of quality for interns before hand. This will ensure the right candidate is chosen and help outline expectations. It is also helpful to begin searching for candidates four months before a student is to begin. This will assure an abundance of applications so the right person is hired for the position. Second, before the intern begins specified activities, clear learning objectives, and a structured outline of duties should be created. Interns need a sense of structure so they don't get confused or bored. According to "Creating a Successful Internship Program" by Jennifer M. Babin, "Giving an intern meaningful work assignments is critical. Students are looking to be more than "go-fer" positions-they hope to make a valuable contribution while learning skills." Research suggests that students rarely complain about being overworked, but they do complain about not being challenged enough, so it is imperative to keep interns busy and working towards learning objectives. Providing an orientation is another key aspect that helps to ensure a quality internship program. This orientation should outline company-oriented information like organization structure, mission, rules, policies, chain of command, etc. It should also provide details on intern responsibilities, expectations, roles, tasks, etc. Another very important aspect of an internship program is to provide a specified mentor. A mentor is needed to provide guidance and knowledge. Jennifer M. Babin also stated, "The mentor should be available to answer questions about the company, industry, and

career opportunities; and to introduce the intern to key members of management and other industry professionals.” To guarantee this communication occurs regular meetings should be scheduled to monitor intern performance and progress. These scheduled meetings tie into the fourth key point, providing feedback. It is very important for interns to receive constant feedback on what and how they are doing. Students are used to periodic feedback in school, so they want to know if they are meeting expectations. Finally, interns need to be evaluated formally and informally. A formal qualitative evaluation should be given on the intern by employer at the end of the program based on learning objectives and expectations address at the orientation. The intern should also evaluate the program for program improvement. In addition to formal evaluations, informal evaluations should be done throughout the semester every now and then.

The Department of Public Works and Engineering can adhere and incorporate some of the above suggestions to get the most out of the School-to-Work Program. The program already features many of the key points including an orientation and formal evaluations. In order to continue improving and providing the best intern experience, the STW program can incorporate having specified mentors for each intern with scheduled meetings and providing constant feedback to monitor progress and expectations. Each division and branch can also establish a broad range of specific activities and projects for interns to participate before the semester begins to provide a steady flow of challenging work.

Conclusions

The most common complaint among college students and recent college grads is they "need experience to get experience" entry-level dilemma. Because this dilemma only seems to be growing more apparent in today's business world, the Department of Public Works and Engineering has taken actions to become part of the solution. Through the creation and implementation of the School-to-Work Program, many college students and recent graduates have gotten the opportunity to apply their classroom knowledge and gain valuable work-related experience. Like all internship programs, the School-to-Work Program has many benefits and creates a win-win situation for all parties involved. Although internships offer a vast amount of benefits, there are still challenges to overcome as well as key aspects to incorporate in order to enhance their effectiveness.

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